

Art, Architecture, and Cultural Lag

Dr. Wagih F. Youssef

Abstract

The tempo of change has been so swift that 21st century man cannot keep pace with contemporary scientists and artists. The span of time between innovations and their understanding, and popular acceptance, is often referred to as cultural lag. Modern art must be understood in terms of its own frame of reference and what the artist is trying to do. He may be trying to achieve disorder rather than order, chaos rather than a cosmos. The act of creating sometimes replaces the importance of the object created. The evolution from Egypt through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to the modern world is an attempt to grip with the complexities of motivation, interpretation and meaning in behalf of man's human accomplishments for life in our time.

Keywords: *humanism, idealism, realism, rationalism, functionalism, emotionalism, eclecticism, impressionism, inner and outer space*

Introduction

To understand the spirit and inner life of a people, the values and drives that caused people to find life tolerable and meaningful, one must examine their arts. Art provides the record of man's experience of his life, perceptions and sensations. Examining art within the times and places of its occurrence registers the degree to which man has attained civilization. The arts in relation to the life and times that produced them provide a deeper understanding of human behavior in the past, and the future that awaits our new generation.

Creativity lies in the imagination. From the void, the man artist conceives an image, out of the chaos he brings order and makes relationships. Egyptians built and embellished their tombs to provide their needs beyond the grave, for art begins in myth and magic in tombs and temples. Men concerned themselves with the natural and supernatural, the real and the unreal, the seen and unseen, the past and the future, the transitory and eternal and there is nothing new under the sun. History holds up the mirror to man, to his present and future as well as to his past. Man constructs to house his body and provide refuge for his spirit. Ever since man caught sight of himself or saw a scene reflected in a still pool, he desired to create a human image, or an imitation of nature. For caveman, art served life. Art and reality were one, and the image was the animal. For them, signs and symbols served better than reality. After looking at cave art, it seems to be a distortion of reality.

Ancient Egyptian Art and Architecture

The shift from a nomadic to a communal life, from a food hunting to a food gathering society, is reflected in the arts by the shift from direct imitation of nature to a more geometric art based on formal principles and traditional conventions. A mixture of

accepted formulas and accurate observations of life is found in the art of ancient Egypt. Through temples, magnificent statuary, representations of priestly ceremonies, the artist could give flesh and blood to the concept of godhood, kingship and priestly authority. Originality and innovation were discouraged yet the paintings of the walls of Egyptian tombs show a keen eye of wealth of naturalistic detail.

Death for the Egyptian did not mean extinction but rather a continuity of life beyond the grave. The tombs' occupant was shown supervising work in the fields, making offerings to the gods, sailing a boat, hunting or fishing, watching the dance, or playing games. In wall paintings and reliefs, fruit and game were provided for his table and handmaidens and manservants for the ministrations of his needs to feel at home. Egyptian tomb art is a recreation of life as it was experienced in the flesh.

Sculpture was used in Architecture as embellishment to relieve the strict functionalism of the structure to endow a building with meaning. A statue became the image of the heroic or godlike ideal toward which a people is striving. Paintings, frescoes and mosaics supply the pictorial dimension. The artist begins the creative process with the vanishing point of the void.

Greek Art and Architecture

When the philosophers Plato and Aristotle discoursed on the arts, they looked for common elements applicable to all and they were keen for unity amid the multiplicities of art, as they were for unity among all the other aspects of human experience. Humanism, idealism, and rationalism provide the framework that surrounds the arts and enclosed them in such a way that they come together into a significant unity.

The Greeks thought of art as an imitation of nature. Plato was afraid that some works of art tended to be more the product of divine madness than of reason. Aristotle could distinguish between historical and poetic truth, fact and fancy. The Hellenistic artist was more interested in exceptions than rules, in the abnormal than the normal, in types than archetypes, in diversity than unity. The Hellenistic artist, by recognizing the complexities of life, gave his attention to shades of feeling and to representing the infinite variety of the world of appearances.

Hellenistic philosophers held that each man has his own feelings, ideas, and opinions entirely different from those of others. Hellenistic philosophers became psychologists analyzing the self and laying bare the causes of inner conflict. Artists turned from the ideal of self- mastery to that of self- expression. Hellenic sculptors never forgot that stone was stone, but their realistic zeal often led later Hellenistic craftsmen to force stone to simulate the softness and warmth of living flesh.

Medieval Art and Architecture

Poetry in medieval times was a popular art form in which verses were chanted. Everyone performed at his best and they were welcomed in castles and abbeys to enliven the nobles in the Gothic period. Since the 11th century secular music forms

were just emerging. The focus of attention in that time was on the words of the poem and the musical element was subordinate and if alone it would not have held an audience and the dominant interest was epic poetry.

In Architecture of the gothic period one has an awareness of the opposition between the masses and voids, the interplay of thrust and counter thrust, and the principle of attraction and repulsion that awaken dead weights into dynamic forces. In sculpture, the conflict of the particular and universal is seen in the remarkable feeling for human individuality in some of the separate figures and the iconographic necessity of molding them into the dignified impersonality required of a row of prophets and saints.

The appeal of the Gothic lies in the very restlessness that prevents the sense of completion which can only be in the imagination. There were, in fact, no finished cathedrals, each lacked something, from a set of spires, in some cases to a nave as at Beauvais. Vincent's encyclopedia and Thomas Aquinas' Summa were likewise never completed. Thus, the object of Gothic thought was to work out a method for comprehending the incomprehensible, for pondering on the imponderables, for dividing the indivisible. Gothic art was designed to bridge the impossible gap between matter and spirit, mass and void, natural and supernatural, inspiration and aspiration, the finite and the infinite.

Renaissance Art and Architecture

Art now entered a new phase of self-awareness as Renaissance artists began to think in terms of aesthetic problems, modes of presentation, and pictorial mechanics. In this trend of scientific naturalism, the arts of painting and sculpture became allied with geometrical and scientific laws, a union that lasted until 21st century expressionism. The illusion of depth on a two-dimensional surface, for instance, was achieved by defining a point at which lines converge, and in foreshortening.

Architecture had to be a kind of logic in stone, sculpture and glass had to be encyclopedic in scope and music had to be a form of mathematics in sound. All experience had to be interpreted intellectually in contrast to the more intuitive and emotional orientation of the Romanesque. To the scholastic philosophers everything must be based on principle of reason that is approachable through the logical power of the mind. Hence the key to understand the universe was in the exercise of man's rational faculties. Philosophical truth or artistic value is determined how logically a proposition fitted a rationally ordered system. Thus, blind acceptance of hallowed evidence of the senses is dependent on the freedom of the will, intuition or reason, because the mind needs order and demands unity above all other considerations.

The human body revealed a spirit of free inquiry, and the study of mathematics. This led to a new concept of space characterized by no sharp cleavage with the past and a desire for personal fame and high regard, in the quality of humanism, and in the tendency of individualism. Architects became mathematicians, sculptors anatomists,

painters, geometricians, and musicians, acousticians. Mathematical proportions of the human body were taken as the basis of its beauty.

Brunelleschi, Michelangelo, and Vasari

Brunelleschi was concerned with the mathematical proportions of his buildings. Alberti stressed the study of mathematics as the underlying principle of all the arts. The result was the reaffirmation of the expressive power of the nude. Painting also is considered as a science, and sculpture a mechanical art. In architecture, the breakthrough in space is reflected in the raising of Brunelleschi's cupola almost 100 meters into the air.

Perfect art rested on the typical Renaissance historical assumptions of the great development of the arts in antiquity. Italians took the greatest pride in the achievements of their own architects, sculptors and painters. From this time art became the standard of perfection under the leadership of Michelangelo Buonarroti who has opened the eyes of all who delight in his arts of painting and sculpture, which had been lost in medieval days and subsequently rediscovered in the then-modern times. Michelangelo's Madonna reveals the unity between bodily beauty and eternal beauty, he links human moral power with eternal goodness, and his organic compositions connect temporal with eternal truth. Even in his abstract architectural form of St. Peter's the pilasters are the slaves imprisoned by the weight of the material burden they must carry, while overhead soars the lofty dome in the geometrical perfection of the circular form symbolizing the paradise that man has lost and that he must somehow regain. The whole building is conceived as an organic system of upward pressures and tensions, culminating in a cupola dissolving into the freedom of infinity.

Andrea Palladio in 1570 the author of the influential *Four Books of Architecture* has left a detailed exposition of his philosophy and noted that he began to measure every minute part of the buildings of the Venetian style which he considered their buildings are the most beautiful edifices that has been erected since the time of the ancients. The buildings he talked about are cubes enclosing cylindrical cores, topped by saucer domes. Each had a flight of steps leading to Ionic porticos and its pediment is as those of classical temple, with statues on either side and above. Each portico provides entrance into the imposing reception room that gives the villa the name "Rotonda". The last building Palladio undertook was the Olympic Theater at Vicenza. Palladio emerges as the most influential architect of his period especially in France, Egypt, England, Ireland and America where it was carried on by Thomas Jefferson, as seen in the Rotunda of the University of Virginia which is as seen in the Villa Rotonda. Even in its present form the White House in Washington D.C. has Palladio's winged design on the White House on either side as of a classical temple portico.

When Vasari, the disciple of Michelangelo used the term Mannerism he meant working in the manner of Leonardo, but studied masterpieces with the thought of assimilating systematically the vocabulary of the late Renaissance giants. Art, in

other words, did not hold up a mirror to nature but rather to art. This implied well-schooled craftsmen and a style based on stereotypes. With Palladio, academic mannerism came to terms with the classical orders of his ancient Roman mentor Vitruvius.

The Enlightenment

In the 18th century as the scientific knowledge of Newton and the social theories of John Locke became the common property of the educated classes, rationalism broadened into the movement of the Enlightenment. The most characteristic expression of the Enlightenment became the 35 volume Encyclopedia. Reason in the vocabulary of the 18th century implied cold intellectuality. As applied to the arts, resentment for the search for expressive forms and sentiments of sufficient universality was to be accepted by all who subscribed to the principles of good taste and judgment. Through the power of knowledge, the age-old shackles of superstition, intolerance and fear began to be thrown off.

The Enlightenment did not go unchallenged, and undercurrents of irrationalism were found in movements that presaged 19th century Romanticism. In Germany, emotionalism burst out in the more violent form of the so called storm-and-stress. Movement that made a rather personal interpretation of Rousseau's initial statement in his Social Contrast. "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." By bursting the bonds of civilized restraints, they were in full rebellion against hereditary aristocratic privilege as well as stern middle-class morality. Their freedom was far from that of Enlightenment, it was in fact an anti-rationalistic, anti-universal, powerfully pro-individualistic freedom that bordered on self-destruction and anarchy.

While it is often called the Age of Reason, the 18th century gave birth to some of the most bizarre and irrational beings, real or imaginary even to populate the mind or imagination. The decorative impulse manifested as the rococo burst out-of-doors into a lavish exterior. Otherwise the architecture has all but disappeared. The triangular repose of the temple pediments and window brackets of the academic style has dissolved into a pattern of undulating curves and broken rhythms, and visionary vistas of the heavens that enliven the vaulting. All other decorative details combine to carry out this sense of heightened motion. The eye is also lost in the vast atmosphere perspective of the painted vaulting. The ideas that weave the arts of the 18th century into coherent pattern are the rococo, the enlightenment and the emotional reaction to them known as the storm and stress, the rococo is the last to adhere strictly to the canon of beauty.

The Enlightenment was accompanied by a spirit of optimism and perfectibility of man. Humanists believed in the intellectual and artistic paradise of ancient Greece and Rome. Heroism and self-sacrifice became manifestations of the revolutionary spirit to confirm the principle that sovereignty resided in the people. Everyone who could read became biography-conscious. Oscar Wilde must have had this revolutionary period in mind by saying that nature is the imitation of art.

Among the important innovations of the time was an increasing emphasis on color in the various artistic media. For architects, color was associated with the picturesque. Viollet-Le-Duc and other architects could duplicate any building in the history of architecture. It was consequently an age of autobiography, memories and showmanship. When the architect did begin using cast iron, it was to build dream castles and neo-medieval cathedrals.

The Industrial Revolution

Late 19th century radical changes were initiated by the Industrial Revolution. This meant the shift from agrarian to an urban economy and the migration of substantial number of people from the farms to the cities. The dynamism of the revolutionary period with its social political, and industrial upheavals, confronted artists with the image of a changing world. No longer were the arts produced only for a small sophisticated group of aristocrats, instead they were addressed to a larger and more anonymous public of the bourgeois class that artistic media were brought closer together and back to nature, and exoticism. Revolutions held high hopes and promised liberation of man. Thus, the rift between usefulness and beauty widened. Refusing to reconcile themselves to the reality, artists sought ever more fanciful ways and means to avoid the issue. As intellectuals, they were better educated and better informed than similar groups in other times had ever been.

The yearning for past periods was expressed in the various revivals. The fuller vocabulary of romantic escapism included the back-to-nature movement, a longing for the lost paradise of a simple life, and exoticism with its fantasies of life in far-off places. Interest in medieval times was awakened, and artists delved deeper into the middle Ages. Revivals of Gothic, Romanesque, and Byzantine styles followed next with admiration for the Renaissance and Baroque periods. After Neoclassicism and Romanticism had run their courses the revival idea led to a broad eclecticism, whereby architects could build in any past style. England and Germany claimed the Gothic style as their own.

The application of modern scientific knowledge to industrial progress opened many possibilities in the arts. Synthetic products replaced the old earth pigments. Architects were wondering how their work could remain in the realm of the fine arts. Painters were seeking a formula for the incorporation into the accepted framework of pictorial art of the new physical discoveries. Artists were diverted from historical subjects into everyday life. Optical realism was persuaded to the point of separating visual experience from memory. The artists were intoxicated by light rather than life, and they saw the world as a myriad of mirrors that refracted a constantly changing of color and intensities of light. To reproduce the fugitive atmospheric effects the impressionists desired they had to work directly from nature. Beauty like color, they felt was in the eye of the beholder not in the picture itself. Their art therefore becomes one of analysis more than synthesis, sensation more than perception, sight more than insight. This means the triumph of technique over expression.

Throughout the 19th century there was a sharp division of thought on the work of an architect. Should an architect work as an artist or a builder, a designer or engineer? Should an architect concern himself with decoration or with structure? However, architects in that time were producing a design based on any known building from the past. What had begun as the revival of special periods had now broadened to include them all. The classical was considered best for memorative buildings and monuments. Medieval was the preference for churches, and Renaissance was thought suitable for public buildings of the 15th century on.

The Industrial Age however had produced new methods and materials that opened novel possibilities in the 18th century. The new materials were a threat to the traditional pictorial designers, and the more progressive architecture became, the more all superfluous ornamentation was omitted in favor of the function of the design, and the realization of the potentialities of the modern materials and the development of a new architecture. The Crystal Palace that Joseph Paxton constructed to house the exposition destined to eclipse the exhibits themselves and to find a place in the history of modern architecture.

Realism and Impressionism

Artists were aware of the success of the scientific method. Realism and impressionism brought a new objective attitude into the arts with an emphasis on the technical side of the crafts. Architects began to look toward engineers for the developments in buildings. A painting for an impressionist was a kind of experiment and problem-solving and a type of visual research problem. Experiments in optical physics revealed secrets of light and color that painters could explore. Increased knowledge of the physiology of the eye and the psychology of perception led to a reexamination of how the observer looks at a picture and what he perceives.

The impressionistic painters convinced us that pictures were composed of light and color, not line and form. Paxton and Eiffel, by incorporating light and air into their designs, achieved an original design and architecture relationship between inner and outer space. Cezanne's path led into a new concept of pictorial geometry that became an important anticipation of 20th century art, and the point of departure of cubism. The atmospheric problems of light and shadow have led to important new developments in sculpture. The fragmentary style of the symbolist anticipated the stream of consciousness and other techniques of modern literature.

Conclusion

Modern art must be understood in terms of its own frame of reference and what the artist is trying to do. He may be trying to achieve disorder rather than order, chaos rather than a cosmos. The act of creating sometimes replaces the importance of the object created. The tempo of change has been so swift that 21st century man cannot keep pace with his scientists and artists. The span of time between innovations and their understanding, and popular acceptance, is often referred to as cultural lag.